

IDEAS AT Work

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Reservations about making reservations

Imagine making your own airline and travel arrangements. It's now possible, if you have a personal computer equipped with a modem — a device that allows your computer to communicate with other computers over telephone lines. By calling a toll-free number and using a new on-line computer system called "Eeasy Sabre," you can look up the lowest fares for any route, select hotels and rental cars, and finalize all the arrangements yourself.

Eeasy Sabre is a subset of Sabre, the on-line reservation system developed by American Airlines for use by its travel agents. It is supplied by Dialcom Inc. of Silver Spring, Md., and several other time-sharing computer services. Any person or company with a PC can access the system for approximately \$22 an hour during business hours, and less at other times.

The big question is, "Why would people want to make travel arrangements themselves, when the airlines and travel agents are just a phone call away, and they are more than happy to do it at no extra charge?"

Believe it or not, it appears that American Airlines has not yet figured out a good answer to this question. The entire system appears to be a "solution in search of a problem."

But big companies don't normally spend millions of dollars to develop products without reason. Here are my best guesses about why they did it, and who might be able to use the system effectively:

✓ The airlines would like nothing better than to cut out travel agents when tickets are sold, and save the 10 percent commission that's normally paid to them. They do this already when people call the airlines directly for reservations and then buy the ticket at the airport or through the mail. Eeasy Sabre appears to be American Airlines' attempt to extend this concept to the sales of tickets for all airlines, hotels and rental cars. If reservations are made directly on

the system by customers, then American Airlines doesn't need to pay commissions on its own tickets, and it receives a *booking fee* from all the other airlines that are ticketed through it.

✓ Probably to placate its agents, the system does allow you to direct the ticketing of your trip to a local travel agent who has a regular American Airlines Sabre system. This feature supports the American Airlines agents. It also permits them to solicit large corporate accounts and train them to do their own bookings. In theory, the local travel agent might then provide a discount to those who do the bookings themselves. In practice, however, I found Eeasy Sabre to be so time-consuming to use that I doubt if many large companies would want to bother with it.

✓ Finally, I suspect that the biggest use of Eeasy Sabre will be from an audience that American Airlines does not expect: small travel agents who either can't afford a regular Sabre system or travel agents working at home who expect to output tickets later at the office. The only disadvantage of this is that Eeasy Sabre does not have many of the bells and whistles of regular Sabre, and not all hotels and services are listed. But in a pinch, agents could make most airline and hotel reservations.

Prime targets for Eeasy Sabre are home users with PCs, who might already be familiar with on-line data bases. I don't think this group is as viable as at-home or smaller travel agents.

What about the rest of us — small businesses and larger companies that have multiple personal computers? My advice is to wait. American Airlines says that they are about to release a new on-line computer system called "Commercial Sabre" that will serve business users better than Eeasy Sabre.

Meanwhile, it's easier to telephone your travel agent and ask, "what's the lowest fare to . . .," than to use the computer at the rate of \$22 per hour.



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